

PARTY HUNTING

Hunting and angling are often group activities. In fact, many traditions that have developed over the years involve gatherings of family and friends for opening days or holiday weekends, where the anticipation is as much about the people as it is about the hunting or fishing.

However, while we pursue walleyes and whitetails in groups of from two to more than 20, hunting and fishing are still individual pursuits. That is, in North Dakota each member of a group is allowed to take only his or her daily limit. That's why when North Dakota game wardens check hunters in the field, they'll often ask each person to separate out which birds they shot.

Hunters are sometimes confused by this exercise, especially when the total number of birds is not over the limit for the group. There is, however, sound reasoning behind this exercise.

Party hunting is not legal in North Dakota.

Each individual hunter may take only his or her own daily limit, or fill his or her own deer tag. The same concept also applies to fishing. There is no legal distinction between shooting someone else's deer, and catching an extra fish to "help" your buddy fill out.

Once a hunter or angler has reached the limit, they cannot legally shoot or catch anything that helps a partner reach their daily limit.

For example, the daily limit for pheasants is three, so a group of six pheasant hunters can have cumulatively 18 roosters at the end of a day in the field. The law allows each hunter to take three birds. If one hunter is a bad shot, there is no provision for someone else to shoot additional birds until the group reaches 18 for the day.

Hunters who have filled out can, however, continue beating the brush to help scare up deer or pheasants, or continue to call geese, etc.

While taking game or fish for others in a group has never been legal in North Dakota, it's no secret that party hunting takes place. Many hunters and anglers have probably, at one time or another, participated in a party hunt/fish, or at least know of others who have. It's well known that some groups do it routinely.

Ethical hunters and anglers abide by the law even if they don't understand or agree with it. Instead of violating a law because the group has always done it, or the likelihood of getting caught is slim, ethical hunters work within the system to try to change laws they feel are unfair or don't work very well.

Such has been the case in the North Dakota legislature for many years. Since 1985, in just about every legislative session, a bill has been introduced that would have allowed party hunting for deer in groups of five or fewer. One bill would have raised the price of a license for those who wanted to party hunt, another would have included

other game. In only two sessions did the party hunting bill pass one body of the legislature. Most times the bills received do-not-pass recommendations in committee and were defeated by substantial margins on floor votes.

While the state legislature has declined every recent opportunity to allow party hunting, the issue still generates periodic interest. At advisory board meetings and other public forums, Game and Fish officials are routinely asked why North Dakota doesn't allow party hunting.

A frequent argument by those who favor party hunting is that Minnesota allows it – not just for deer, but also for upland game (and fishing) – and it has been an accepted practice for decades. (Federal regulations prevent any state from allowing party hunting for migratory game.)

Conversely, North Dakota's other border states, Montana and South Dakota, do not allow party hunting or fishing for any species.

Proponents of party hunting have offered many justifications over the years, as have those who believe the current system is best for North Dakota. Following are many of the factors that have been a part of this debate for decades ... From Both Sides.

One Side

- Some people just don't shoot straight, or are not very good anglers. Allowing others in the party to help poor shooters/anglers fill their limit gets them some game and fish to eat.
- With North Dakota's high deer population, wouldn't party hunting help increase overall success so more tags are filled?
- Hunting and fishing are often a group endeavor, so it just makes sense to allow the group to fill its collective limit.
- Many groups have always party hunted for deer; allowing it would just legalize something that has been going on for years. Why worry about something that is difficult to enforce anyway?
- Party hunting is an effective strategy for "drives" for deer or pheasants, especially in wooded areas or other heavy cover. "Posters" or shooters should be allowed to take deer for drivers if the opportunity arises and the group agrees to it.
- Grandpa can't see very well and needs some help.
- Party hunting is a tradition. Other states do it, so what's wrong with allowing it in North Dakota?
- Our family depends on the meat and whoever gets it doesn't matter.
- Our group has a mix of buck and doe tags. If you party hunt, each hunter can shoot either until the party gets its quota.

The Other Side

• In states like North Dakota where a limited and specific number of deer licenses are issued by unit, legal party hunting would reduce a person's chances for obtaining high interest licenses, such as those for whitetail bucks, mule deer bucks, or even muzzle-loader bucks. The number of buck licenses in any unit is limited. If party hunting were allowed, then a person could find three other people who are not that interested in buck hunting (the spouse, kids, etc.), or even deer hunting, but would go along anyway. Then the one real deer hunter could legally shoot four bucks. The result would be that three serious and dedicated buck hunters would go without a buck license that year.

• This would increase the number of years a person could go without a buck license, and would increase the level of dissatisfaction over not being able to get a buck license on a more frequent basis, which is already a common complaint.

• Party hunting for deer is likely such a tradition in Minnesota because drives were a standard strategy that favored the party hunting approach, and because of a low overall success rate (until recently) in the state's forested areas. North Dakota's hunter success rate is already one of the highest in the country.

• If party hunting were allowed in North Dakota, it would likely increase hunter success rates. Because Game and Fish manages deer on a unit basis, and issues specific licenses, the agency might have to reduce the number of licenses, especially buck licenses, to counter increased hunter success. This would mean fewer hunters would get buck licenses. For example, assuming a 10 percent increase in hunter success, Game and Fish would have to decrease the number of buck licenses by 12.5 percent. This would have meant about 5,900 fewer buck licenses issued last year.

• Minnesota Department of Natural Resources officials indicate their party hunting privilege is frequently abused.

• Modern hunter ethics maintain that you shoot your own game and don't waste the animal. Party hunting violates the code of ethics.

• There is no need to have party hunting. Many units currently allow unlimited numbers of doe tags so those who want to shoot more deer can get tags in their own name.

• Buck hunters want to shoot their own big buck and not have anyone else shoot it for them.



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• Party hunting can ruin the hunt for some groups because one shooter sometimes shoots most or all of the deer, even though some in the group want to shoot their own deer.

• Everyone does not do it, or want it. The "no-party-hunting law" helps keep some aggressive shooters in line.

• While the law may be difficult to enforce, most people are honest and stay within the law.

• One of the worst possible feelings for a young hunter is having to put his or her deer tag on a deer someone else shot. The party philosophy, whether it's deer, birds or fish, and whether it's legal or not, reduces opportunity for beginning hunters or anglers because they are usually not the most skilled. To ensure young hunters and anglers maintain an interest, the group should give priority to making opportunities for younger members.

• Party hunting for deer, when there is a lack of communication, can lead to more deer taken than available licenses would allow. This could lead to deer left in the field and wasted.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.